

Wright State University

CORE Scholar

Local and Rare Books

Special Collections and Archives

1867

Preamble and Resolution of the Philadelphia County Medical Society upon the Status of Women Physicians, with a Reply by a Woman

Philadelphia County Medical Society

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/special_books



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Philadelphia County Medical Society (1867). *Preamble and Resolution of the Philadelphia County Medical Society upon the Status of Women Physicians, with a Reply by a Woman*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Stuckey.

This Monograph is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Collections and Archives at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Local and Rare Books by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

WOMEN AS PHYSICIANS.

In a recent discussion before the Philadelphia County Medical Society, upon the Status of Women Practitioners of Medicine, the following Preamble and Resolution were adopted:

Looking to the usefulness and dignity of the profession, which are inseparably connected with the welfare of the community, we are not without very grave objections to women taking on themselves the heavy duties and responsibilities of the practice of medicine. Their success in the walks of general literature, and even in some instances of science, which allow them a choice of time and season for intellectual labor, cannot be adduced as arguments in favor of their ability to bear up under the bodily and mental strain to which they would be unceasingly subjected in this new vocation. The physiological peculiarities of woman even in single life, and the disorders consequent on them, cannot fail frequently to interfere with the regular discharge of her duties as physician in constant attendance on the sick. How much greater must be the interruption to her duties if she enters the marriage state, and becomes a mother and nurse. The delicate organization and predominance of the nervous system render her peculiarly susceptible to suffer, if not to sink, under the fatigue and the mental shocks which she must encounter in her professional round. Man, with his robust frame and trained self-command, is often barely equal to the task. The home influence of woman is one of the greatest benefits growing out of christian civilization. More especially is this manifest when we look at her as the head of the household, a help-mate to her husband, and the confidante, guide, instructor, and loving friend of her children, whose future happiness and respectability so much depend on her tuition and example. What would be the state of the household, what the present condition and future prospects of the children, deprived to a considerable extent of their natural guardian, who would be engaged all day and not se-

cure against calls in the night, in the service of the sick? Nor when at home, can the mother, worried and fretted and anxious about her patients, give healthy milk to her infant, or be in a fit frame of mind to interchange endearments with her beloved little ones, to receive their confidences and offer advice.

Once embarked in the practice of medicine, a female physician will not long confine herself to attendance on persons of her own sex. Curiosity, caprice, the novelty of the thing, would induce some men to ask the professional advice of a woman doctor. It is sufficient to allude merely to the embarrassments which would be encountered on both sides, in her visiting and prescribing for persons of the opposite sex. If her services be restricted to the female portion of the family, then must there be a male physician to attend on the males, and thus there will be constantly two physicians in the regular service of a family, with all the chances of counter-prescriptions and advice and breach of ethics, misunderstandings and heartburnings, by each one passing the lines of the other. If a female physician be once received in full standing, and professional intercourse by consultation or at other times with a physician of our sex be allowed, the greatest latitude will be taken and given in the statement of the case of disease, whatever it may be, its symptoms and causes, and questions of treatment therapeutical and psychical. Will woman gain by ceasing to blush while discussing every topic as it comes up with philosophic coolness, and man be improved in the delicate reserve with which he is accustomed to address woman in the sick room? The bounds of modesty once passed in this professional intercourse, will the additional freedom of speech and manner thus acquired impart grace or dignity to a woman in her new character?

Could women be induced to see the true line of duty in relation to medical study, it would be to learn preventive medicine and acquire a suitable knowledge of physiology and hygiene, so as to be able to preserve their own health and that of their children, and to inculcate on the latter the close connection between the physical and mental well being of our nature. The field is large, and its cultivation would richly repay the laborers in it.

In no other country than our own is a body of women authorized to engage in the general practice of medicine. The specialty of midwifery practice in France is hedged in by regulations which call for the assistance of medical men in any case of difficulty or doubt.

Moved by these considerations, be it therefore

RESOLVED, *That, in conformity with what they believe to be due to the profession, the community in general and the female portion of it in particular, the members of this Society cannot offer any encouragement to women becoming practitioners of medicine, nor, on these grounds, can they consent to meet in consultation with practitioners.*

REPLY.

The following communication appeared in the "Medical and Surgical Reporter" of May 4th, 1867:

EDITOR MEDICAL AND SURGICAL REPORTER :

I have read with surprise the preamble and resolution adopted by the Philadelphia County Medical Society, and published in the MEDICAL AND SURGICAL REPORTER of the 6th ult., in reference to the status of women-physicians; and as a subscriber to the REPORTER, and one personally interested in the bearing of that decision, I trust I may be permitted, through the same channel, to examine the arguments which support the resolution.

Although shrinking from all controversy, and seeking the quiet path of duty, the time has come when fidelity to a great cause seems to demand that I should speak for myself and for the women with whom I am associated in this movement, and give a reason for the course we are pursuing.

The "very grave objections to women taking on themselves the heavy duties and responsibilities of the profession" appear to be based, in the *first* place, upon the assumption that they do not possess the "ability to bear up under the bodily and mental strain to which they would be unceasingly subjected in this new vocation;" in the *second*, upon the presumed incompatibility of professional practice with the best home influence of the woman and the duties of the mother; in the *third* place, upon the collision and practical difficulties that might arise if different members of the same family should employ two physicians—a man and a woman; and *lastly*, the objections are made upon the ground of the equivocal effect of medical consultations upon the modesty and delicacy of feeling of those who may thus meet; and also upon the fact, that "in no other country but our own is a body of women authorized to engage in the general practice of medicine."

In regard to the *first* difficulty, few words need be expended. Pausing merely to allude to the fact, that in barbarous communities women is pre-eminently the laborious drudge, and that in civilized society she is the *nurse*, keeping her unceasing vigils, not only by the cradle of infancy, but by every bed of sickness and suffering, with a power of sustained endurance that man does not even claim to possess; that her life is as long, and her power of surmounting its painful vicissitudes not inferior to his, we come to the open, undeniable fact, that women *do* practice medicine, that they *are* able "to bear up under the bodily and mental strain" that this practice imposes, and that "natural obstacles" have not obstructed their way.

There are in this city women who have been engaged in the practice of medicine a dozen years, who to-day have more vigor and power of endurance than they possessed in the beginning of their career; and the fact of "their delicate organization and predominance of the nervous system," combined with their "trained self-command," is the very reason that in some cases their counsel has been preferred to that of the more robust man.

The *second* objection, bearing upon the home influence of woman, has certainly another side.

Probably more than half the women of this city and country are under the stern necessity of supporting themselves by their own exertions. Some mothers leave their young children day by day and go out to labor, in order to be able to bring them bread at night; others sew away their strength for the pittance which barely keeps famine from their doors, and, exhausted with their labors, they are indeed not in "a fit frame of mind to interchange endearments with their beloved little ones;" nor can they, even with the price of life itself, surround them with the home influences and comforts needful to their healthful and harmonious development.

If the woman who has studied medicine should be surrounded by a family of young children, we should surely regard it as a misfortune if the same overpowering necessity should compel her to follow an active practice during the period that these heavy maternal claims were pressing upon her; although even then, her duties would be less exhausting, and her time less continuously occupied than are hers who supports her family by sewing or washing.

But although the mother may not actively exercise her profession, the knowledge of preventive medicine which she possesses will surely aid her in training her children in accordance with those hygienic rules which are now so sadly neglected in families, and will not detract from that pure, sweet, "home influence" which is the safeguard of the happiness and integrity of society.

We know of quite a number of medical women, who, in consequence of the remunerations of their practice, have been able to make themselves the centres of happy homes, which otherwise they could not have done; and some of these, in their thanksgivings for the daily interests and enjoyments of their lives, count it among their deepest blessings that they have been enabled to pursue a course which so richly satisfies their *womanly* sympathies and affections, as well as gives scope to their intellectual cravings and powers.

The *third* objection, in regard to collisions and "heart-burnings," could scarcely apply to high-toned physicians who know what belongs to the proprieties of their position. The danger would seem to be equally imminent if the medical advisers were both of the same sex, and yet we all know it is quite common in this city for more than one practitioner to attend the different members of

the same family—one being preferred for his supposed skill in one class of cases, another for his superior reputation in another class; and we have yet to learn that injurious results follow this proximity of practitioners.

The natural tendency would seem to be, to foster care and research; and if mutual observation of the results of treatment should occasionally suggest improved methods and break up old, sluggish routine in either party, the profession and the community will surely be gainers by this mutual stimulus.

The objection upon the ground of the invasion of delicacy in examining questions of disease and treatment is indeed an astonishing one, to come from a body of scientific and right-minded physicians. Who are the patients treated by these men? Often women—the sensitive and refined. The whole nature of the malady must be investigated and the means of recovery enforced. If, as frequently happens, to save the shrinking sensitiveness of the young woman, some tender experienced mother or elder friend informs the physician of the symptoms and conveys to the patient his conclusions, she, for the time, performs the part of the attending physician in reference to the consulting one; yet who will dare assert that her womanly modesty is compromised, or that “the delicate reserve with which” a man “is accustomed to address woman in the sick-room” is injuriously affected by this necessary and humane intervention?

Among the motives which have contributed to the support of this movement, that of shielding the sensibilities of shrinking women has not been the least.

Men opposed to the medical education of women have, in some cases, changed their views when the subject has been brought home to their feelings in the person of some beloved member of their own families, and they have appreciated the mental suffering which the dread of medical investigation has caused. Physicians, too,—the father, husband, and brother,—have asked our counsel in the cases of those dearest to them; and they have asked it because we are women, and as such, they believed we might elicit the cause of suffering, and apply the means of relief, as they had not been successful in doing.

But leaving these special points, there are broad, general grounds upon which, as physicians and as women, we stand, and appeal from the resolution of the Philadelphia County Society to the better judgment of true-hearted professional men.

When once it is admitted that women have souls, and that they are accountable to God for the uses of the powers which He has given them, then the exercise of their own judgment and conscience in reference to these uses, becomes a thing which they cannot, rightfully, yield to any human tribunal.

As responsible beings, who must abide by the consequences of our course for time and for eternity, we have decided for ourselves

that the study and practice of medicine are proper, womanly, and adapted to our mental, moral, and physical constitution.

We will scarcely be charged with presumption in supposing that our instincts may be as pure, our intuitions as clear, our sense of what is right and fitting for ourselves as reliable, as are those of the men who condemn our course.

We are sustained by the approval and sympathy of the best men and women,—by the moral sentiment of the general community. We feel, and society feels, that we are not usurping the place of men, but taking a position in the broad field of medicine which appropriately belongs to women; and that we shall enlarge the sphere of professional usefulness, and contribute to the knowledge which shall bless the race.

The names of those who support our Hospital and College are largely the names of those of whom Philadelphia is justly proud, as representatives of her intelligence, respectability, and moral worth.

That we have not had the facilities for acquiring medical information is a charge that, it seem to us, should hardly come from those who have systematically closed hospitals and colleges against our applications for admission, and who have endeavored to prevent the members of their fraternity from assisting us in our struggle for knowledge.

That we have stemmed this tide of opposition, and found opportunities for obtaining medical instruction—some in other cities and across the ocean, some by persevering and long-continued efforts in various ways at home; that we have found noble men in the profession to assist us, and that we have been able to found hospitals and open various channels for practical education—*is due to the inherent vitality of our cause*, and its strong hold upon the sympathies and convictions of the community.

That we have not yet all the facilities for instruction that are needed, we are fully aware.

That “there are female graduates who are a disgrace to the medical profession,” we also know too well: for the sake of humanity we would that we could truly add, that the graduates who disgrace the profession are found *only* among women!

From the nature of the relation of physicians to society, not more than one man in hundreds follows medicine as a profession, and the proportion of women, under the most favoring circumstances, will probably not be greater; but the systematic training, and the knowledge of physiological functions and hygienic conditions involved in a thorough medical education for the few, will, we believe, be reflected in many homes, and be one of the means of radically changing that mistaken plan of education, and those destructive social customs and habits, which are now undermining the health, and darkening the lives of so many of the women of this country.

If it be true that “in no other country but our own is a body of women authorized to engage in the general practice of medicine,”

the fact is no more an argument against its propriety than is the fact that in no other country are the rights of the people so acknowledged and secured, an argument against the propriety of republican institutions.

We regard this movement as belonging to the advancing civilization of the age—as the inevitable result of that progressive spirit which is unfolding human capabilities in many directions, and which has perceived that it is the condition of the highest health and happiness for woman, that she, also, should exercise the powers with which she has been endowed in accordance with her own convictions and feelings, and in harmony with her nature and organization.

That our position is womanly—that this work is established in the fitness of things and in the necessities of society, and that the movement belongs to the “revolutions which never go backward,” we have no shadow of doubt.

For us it is the post of restful duty—the place assigned to us, as we believe, in the order of Providence, and we can do no other than maintain it.

But on behalf of a little band of true-hearted young women who are just entering the profession, and from whose pathway we fain would see annoyances and impediments removed, we must protest, in the sacred name of our common humanity, against the injustice which places difficulties in our way,—not because we are ignorant, or pretentious, or incompetent, or unmindful of the code of medical or Christian ethics, but because we are women.

ANN PRESTON, M.D.

Philadelphia, April 22, 1867.

PREAMBLE AND RESOLUTION
OF THE
Philadelphia County Medical Society
UPON
THE STATUS OF WOMEN PHYSICIANS,
WITH
A REPLY BY A WOMAN.

Stuckey, Printer, 624 Weaver Street, Philadelphia.